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ABSTRACT

A discussion is presented concerning the various influences, internal and external, which direct a woman to return to school. A review of the literature was made. Subjects were a sample of women who contacted the Center for Continuing Education of Women from 1964-1972. A mail questionnaire was sent to these women to provide some understanding about how helpful the Center is to them, the problems of women returning to school, and some of the more general attitudes of women. Results are given. The women in this study are relatively affluent, come from relatively well-educated families, and are returning to school of their own accord. The major problems encountered in a return to school center on managing time. The most significant life changes reported include achieving stated goals, getting a degree, gaining a specific skill, and achieving a sense of accomplishment. (C)

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Continuing Education for Women: Factors Influencing a Return to School and the School Experience

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Continuing Education for Women: Factors Influencing a Return to School and the School Experience

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During the past five years, there has been an impressive increase in the number of special programs designed to aid adult women returning to school. A 1971 survey by the U. S. Department of Labor listed 435 different continuing education programs for women. This represents an 80% increase over the number of programs reported three years earlier.

A woman's decision to continue her education by returning to school may be the result of a number of situational or social pressures, chief among them present or anticipated economic need. A woman's decision to continue her education by returning to school, however, may be viewed as a self-initiated attempt to actively change and improve her life. Studies of adult socialization rarely focus on these types of self-initiated changes. Most investigations, whether of children or adults, view the socialization process as one in which social groups or persons transmit values or train the individual for some existing role. It is difficult, of course, to separate the determinants of an individual's decision, and external demands are important in almost every decision. More attention, however, needs to be given to any decision which involves some elements of goal-setting and self-induced change, and to those activities which are more a result of one's own efforts than a result of the demands of others (Brim, 1968; Neugarten, 1972). The motivations for these changes and their outcomes need to be systematically investigated.

Brim (1968) claims that self-initiated socialization, such as a return to school, stems from greater affluence of the average adult and, thus, an

increase in what one can expect from life in terms of personal gratification and self-fulfillment. Several specific social and economic changes are related to the growth in educational programs for women: technological advances lightening household tasks and giving women more free time; longer life expectancy and ealier marriage and childbearing; and, probably most importantly, a clarification and expansion of the various life styles and roles open to all women.

Contacting a center for continuing education can be viewed as a decision point where anticipated self-initiated life changes and the motivations for these changes can be studied. This report is based on a sample of women who have contacted the Center for Continuing Education of Women at The University of Michigan. It will focus on 1) making a decision to continue education: why women come to the Center, characteristics of women contacting the Center, the decisions made, and differences between those women returning to school and those not returning; and 2) the school experience itself: changes in home and family life, institutional problems encountered, and factors important to success.

The Center for the Continuing Education of Women at Michigan was established in 1964 and has counselled over 4,000 women. It provides individual and vocational guidance to women whose schooling has been interrupted. The Center is available to all women of the community, but it is primarily designed to help women with family and/or employment responsibilities resume their higher education.

From statistics compiled by existing continuing education programs and a few studies of mature women graduate students, we know something about the population of women that return to school (Schletzer, et al., 1967; Davis, et al., 1966; Burton, 1960; Withycombe-Brocato, 1970; Likert, 1967;

Westervelt, 1971). The first continuing education programs seemed to attract women who were relatively affluent, educated through high school or beyond, and without clear cut goals other than expanding their realm of interests beyond the home. Usually these women wanted to prepare for employment and needed help in thinking through the problems involved in returning to school. In a related area we know that women who have completed their education in order to pursue a career often identify with parents who adhered to non-traditional sex roles, or with adults outside the family. In addition, such women tend to have developed career and intellectual interests in college, to be more autonomous and individualistic, and to have developed a feeling of independence and internalized criteria for esteem (Newcomb, et al., 1967; Ginzberg & Yohalen, 1966; Murphy & Rausenbush, 1960; Schletzer, 1967; Bardwick, 1971).

There has been almost no research, however, on the reasons behind a woman's decision to continue her education. Research on a related question, reasons underlying a vocational decision, is vague and equivocal, suggesting only that a choice of vocation is in some way related to a desire to implement the self-concept (Super, 1963; Tiedeman & O'Hara, 1963). For college women in the typical undergraduate age range (18-22), going to college is beset by role conflict problems, i.e., achievement orientation versus the prescribed feminine role (Douvan & Gold, 1961; Maccoby, 1963; Horner, 1965). For many college women, achieving independently and occupationally only becomes important when affiliative needs are met and feminine identity is achieved (Bardwick, 1971). For older women, married and with children, this feminine identity is assured, and returning to school seems to mark a period of determination and goal setting, a phase of achievement unhindered by worries over affiliative needs. Some women, of course, may

gratify achievement needs through the task of creative childrearing (Veroff & Feld, 1971). However, as the children grow older and childrearing is not such a demanding task, a return to school may be viewed as an alternative means of engaging achievement expectancies.

A study by Baruch (1967) indicates that there is a temporal cycle in the achievement motive associated with the age and family situation of college educated women. A period of high achievement needs before beginning a family is followed by a period of decline in achievement needs corresponding to a phase of high family involvement. When the family is grown there is a return to the previous high level of need for achievement. These findings suggest that a return to school, at least for the older woman, may be an attempt to reclaim the ground many women lose in personal development and self-esteem during the middle years of adulthood (Rossi, 1968; Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960). Several studies of returning women graduate students find that becoming a better person and developing one's potentials are in fact the chief motivating factors in returning to school (Withycombe-Brocato, 1968; Doty, 1966). For other, especially younger, women, the vocational uses of continuing education are most important (Westervelt, 1971).

Exploration of the school experience itself, its impact on home and family, and general factors important to successful completion of goals has been sparse. A considerable amount of study has been given to the working woman, however. Generally, working mothers (working from choice), compared to homemakers, report greater life satisfaction and self-esteem (Nye & Hoffman, 1963; Gurin, Veroff & Feld, 1960; Birnbaum, 1971). It is reasonable to expect that similar reports could be elicited from women returning to school.

The several studies available on women returning to school suggest that although women do experience the anticipated problems with combining school responsibilities and family responsibilities, most find ways to manage (Davis, 1966). A critical factor in continuing a program, as well as the decision to begin school, appears to be the husband's favorable attitude (Davis, 1966; Westervelt, 1971).

Investigations of programs for women have found considerable discrimination against older or part-time students. The returning woman student often is confronted with a questioning of her motives and capabilities. Most faculty members are not prepared to deal with the problems of returning women students (Addis, 1967). Usually, however, the returning woman student has strong motivation, seriousness of purpose, persistence, and adaptability (Campbell, 1972). She performs well in school, often better than other groups of women (Fagerburg, 1970).

More systematic information is needed on women returning to school, how they succeed in meeting the goals they set for themselves, and the problems they face. Research indicates that a return to school is basically motivated by a need for independent achievement in other than interpersonal areas. This need for achievement is evidenced by setting new goals and attempting to meet them. In this study it was hypothesized that women who are successful in returning to school are likely to have support from the immediate social environment, adequate child care facilities, an equitable distribution of household chores within the family, and hold the view that family responsibilities can be successfully combined with other responsibilities. The eventual impact of a return to school also should be affected by the institutional problems encountered. The number of these problems should increase with age and the amount of time away from an academic environment. To the extent that women are successful in returning to school they should experience

renewed feelings of competence and self-esteem.

The achievement need and self-esteem are used as global concepts rather than as more specified sets of related concepts. The achievement need is interpreted as a motive for success in performing tasks, and self-esteem as the evaluation an individual places upon himself. For many women, especially those that have at least some college education before beginning a family, the traditional feminine role often does not allow them to fulfill their perceived potential or to achieve independently and may result in lowered self-esteem. It was hypothesized that women not returning to school should be relatively less satisfied with themselves than women returning to school, unless they have experienced gratification of independent achievement needs through career employment.

METHOD

The subjects for this study were a sample of women who had contacted the Center for Continuing Education of Women from 1964-1972. A contact usually involved filling out an information sheet and an appointment with a counselor. Approximately 4000 women have contacted the Center since it was established. A random sample of 150 subjects was drawn by selecting every 24th name from the alphabetical file. A mail questionnaire was specifically developed by the author for this study, incorporating questions used by Judith Birnbaum (1971) for her study on life patterns, personality style, and self-esteem in gifted, family-oriented, and career committed women, and questions developed by Elizabeth Douvan. Subjects were asked to complete the questionnaire to help understand something about how helpful the Center is in meeting the various educational needs of women, the problems and experiences of women returning to school, as well as some more general attitudes and feelings of women.

The questionnaire itself was divided into three parts (see Appendix A). The first section dealt with the visit to the Center, goals at this time, reasons for contacting the Center, and the outcome of this contact. The second section explored the school experience itself, reasons for returning, problems encountered, factors important in success, and how school was combined with family responsibilities. The third section focused on the background of the subjects, activities, attitudes, and values. There were questions on family occupational and education status, attitudes toward marriage and children, involvement in community organizations, achievements and satisfactions, and attitudes toward combining marriage and career.

This section also included self-rating on characteristics like attractiveness, competitiveness, and dependence, a 21 item self-esteem measure, and a five item test of social desirability. The self-esteem items were taken from some unpublished item development by Rick Crandall (1972). The social desirability items were from Marlowe-Crowne (1961).

The questionnaire was sent under the auspices of the Center for Continuing Education of Women. Subjects were asked to complete the questionnaire whether or not they returned to school. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was proveded. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Of the 150 questionnaires that were mailed out, approximately 30 were not received. In most of these cases, the potential respondents had moved and had not provided the Center with a new address. Of the 120 received, 83 were returned, after a post-card and two telephone call follow-ups. This amounted to a response rate of 69%. There was, of course, the problem that the non-respondents may have differed significantly from the respondents, in which case estimates based on the latter would be biased. Checking the sample against total population figures kept by the Center on such items as age, marital status, and educational background, indicated that the sample was representative of the Center's population, with one possible exception. Those under 25 comprised only 9% of the sample. Statistics kept by the Center indicate that the percentage of younger people contacting the Center is somewhat larger than this number, especially in recent years. These younger people are the most mobile and transient members of a university community, the people most likely to have moved since their initial Center contact, and may account for a large portion of the unreturned questionnaires.

The open-ended questions were content analyzed and then coded with the remainder of the questionnaire. Scores on the self-esteem measure ranged from

34 to 117 with a mean of 86.9. There was a .01 correlation between the self-esteem scores and the social desirability scores. This low correlation between scores on these two scales may indicate that the self-esteem scale is tapping an underlying personality trait and not just a subject's desire to present himself as socially desirable.

It should be emphasized that this study was largely exploratory, although guided by some basic questions based on related work. An attempt was made to uncover salient overall patterns and to accumulate some systematic information on the returning woman student.

FINDINGS

Who are the women that contact the Center?

In this sample, 53% of the women are between 30 and 40 years of age, 76% between 30 and 50 years of age. Those under 25 comprised 9% of this sample. The majority of the women are married (80%) and 84% of them have children, 70% two or more children, 45% with three or more children.

The majority of women returning to school (71%) already have some college credit. These percentages compare favorably with those collected by the Center during its seven years of operation and indicate that this sample is fairly representative of the Center's population.

The parents and husbands of these women also are well educated. Seventy-three percent of the husbands of these women have at least a B.A. degree, and 39% have a professional degree (MD or JD) or a doctorate. Less than 17% have husbands without a college education. The initial suggestion might be that a highly educated group of men supports the continuing education of their wives. Seventy-five percent of the husbands are earning over $10,000 a year, with 57% earning more than $15,000 annually. Looking at the family educational background of these women, 67% of their fathers,

and 42% of their mothers have at least some college education. These women are representative of the highly select group that uses the Center. As suggested earlier, a return to school appeared to be a by-product of relative affluence. The economically and educationally disadvantaged are not included.

The majority of these women appear to be leading full and active lives at the time of contacting the Center. Seventy-three percent belong to at least one volunteer organization and 49% to two or more.

Contacting the Center and making a decision

Women contacting the Center were seeking a variety of assistance including clarification of goals, thinking through their problems in returning to school, and securing admission and registration. The goals they set for themselves ranged from mentions of specific aims--finishing a degree (32%), training for a future job (30%)--to the more general aims of planning future education (31%) and self and family enrichment (37%). Some came to the Center with precise goals in mind, while others expected their further education to crystallize their goals for them. The vast majority, however, appear to have at least a general goal in mind and some ideas about how to realize it.

A clear majority (70%) of these women indicated that the Center was at least somewhat helpful to them. Sixty-five percent were in the process of making a decision to return when they contacted the Center. Others were seeking help in transferring or scheduling, information on child care and financial assistance, or help in finding a job. Eighty-eight percent of the women contacted the Center only once or twice, and 45% of them reached an immediate decision which involved the pursuit of continuing education. Thirty-six percent decided at the time of their initial contact not to return to school. Many of these women (46%), however, returned to school at some later point. Of those deciding not to return, 51% decided either to get a job or to continue in their present occupation. Twenty-one percent decided to postpone the

decision regarding further education for a specific period. The reasons most frequently given for not returning included family and financial burdens, and other opportunities, notably employment.

Reasons for returning to school

When given a choice between two primary reasons for continuing their education, 58% of the women stated that they were interested in goals like finding stimulation, enlarging their own interests and pleasures, and increasing skills as a wife and mother, while 29% stated that finding an interesting and satisfying job was the most important goal. Thirteen percent felt that both goals were equally important.

The specific reason most often given for returning to school usually has two aspects. There is the desire for expansion and personal enrichment coupled with the hope that the stimulation and expanded horizons provided by a return to school may one day be given some practical, useful application. Although, for the majority of women, general goals and values of education may appear as the most important factor in continuing education, rarely was self-enrichment given as a goal without tying it to some more concrete aim. The frequently mentioned specific reasons for returning to school included obtaining a degree (26%), training for a new job, career, or gaining some specific skill (47%), advancing in present job (10%), and insuring financial security (3%).

These women are attuned to the potential for general self development and growth provided by further education, but they also are able to define fairly specific goals to be achieved through continuing their education. To grow or develop in some vague and unspecified way is clearly not enough for these women. In most cases, their commitment is fairly long term and much more inclusive than just getting out of the house or finding a new part time activity. These findings, along with those from the majority of studies

of returning women, clash sharply with any suggestion that continuing education involves rusty ladies finding something to do with free Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Controversies over whether facilities for education should be used for "the production of cultured and enlightened mothers" are largely moot: few women want an education for this purpose alone. No systematic relationships were discovered, however, between the type of goal that was set or the reason for returning and how well these women did in school, or the impact of the school experience in home and family life.

The school experience

As noted in several earlier studies, the advice and opinions of others, especially the husband, often are critical in making a decision to return to school, and once returning, staying in school. During the time these women were in school as adult returnees, 82% reported that they received some help and encouragement from their husbands, with 58% reporting a great deal of help and encouragement. The majority of women also felt that they received at least some help and encouragement from their children and friends.

In an attempt to relate various measures of success in school to the amount of encouragement received, a clear pattern emerged between drop-out and perceived encouragement. Although the reasons for dropping out are varied, dropping out can be viewed as a lack of success in returning to school. The various reasons given for leaving school will

be discussed later. As Table 1 indicates, the more help and encouragement the returning student felt that she received from her husband, the greater the likelihood she would stay in school. Although cell frequencies are small, the pattern is unambiguous.

TABLE 1

Perceived Husband's Encouragement and Drop-out

	Encouragement			
	None at all	Very little	Some	A great deal
Drop-out	100.0% (3)	50.0% (3)	41.7% (5)	39.3% (11)
No Drop-out	0.0% (0)	50.0% (3)	58.3% (7)	60.7% (17)

These results suggest that, even though a return to school is a self-initiated attempt at change prompted by internal needs and motives, there is still a great need for a supporting social, interpersonal environment. Brim (1968), for instance, has noted that when an adult seeks change, the immediate social environment is crucial to the outcome of the change. Less immediate support--but nevertheless important to drop-out decisions--is the help and encouragement of instructors and advisers, and employers (see Tables 2 and 3).

TABLE 2

Perceived Employer Encouragement and Drop-out

	Encouragement			
	None at all	Very little	Some	A great deal
Drop-out	88.9% (8)	50.0% (1)	50.0% (3)	16.7% (1)
No Drop-out	11.1% (1)	50.0% (1)	50.0% (3)	83.3% (5)

TABLE 3

Perceived Instructor Encouragement and Drop-out

	Encouragement			
	None at all	Very little	Some	A great deal
Drop-out	71.4% (5)	57.1% (4)	35.3% (6)	50.0% (9)
No Drop-out	28.6% (2)	42.9% (3)	64.7% (11)	50.0% (9)

Similar patterns emerged with the perceived encouragement from children, friends, parents, and neighbors. To combine this information into an index of encouragement, scores from each of the seven items (husband, children, parents, neighbors, friends, advisors, and employers) were standardized, summed, and divided by seven. (Missing data was assigned a score of zero, i.e., the mean of the standardized score. Individuals with missing data on more than three items did not receive an index score.). The resultant index

scores were collapsed into two groups, those less than the mean value of zero, and those greater than or equal to the mean value of zero. The result is summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Index of Perceived Encouragement and Drop-out

	Encouragement		
	Low	High	Total
Drop-out	68.2% (15)	37.5% (9)	52.2% (24)
No Drop-out	31.8% (7)	62.5% (15)	47.8% (22)

$\chi^2 = 4.33$, $p < .05$

It is possible, of course, that in reviewing the school experience some women may see their dropping out as a result of lack of support from the social environment, when it is actually a result of personal lack of interest, motivation, or ability. However, it seems that one of the factors important to success in a return to school is a sense of continual support and encouragement from important others.

Returning to school does pose some problems for most women. As would be expected, these usually center around the management of time and how family responsibilities can be juggled to accommodate the pressures and demands of classes. Sixty-four percent of the women reported that spending less time with children created some problem. Fifty-six percent felt that spending less time with their husbands also was some problem. Spending less time with friends (44%), neglecting housework (53%), and putting extra responsibilities on husband and children (42%) also posed some problem for

returning women. Only a few women, however, reported major problems in any of these areas.

Apparently, for these women, returning to school does not cause radical changes in their patterns of responsibilities and is viewed as another activity which must be integrated into the existing family life style. Forty-seven percent indicated that going back to school did not affect the distribution of household chores in the family. Another 45% reported that the family shared the chores. However, when the distribution of housework among the woman, her husband, and children before a return to school is compared with the distribution after a return to school, very little difference is observable, suggesting that if the family shared the chores it was because they had always done so and this was not a redistribution based on the woman's return to school. Before entering school, 86% reported doing all or most of the housework. While in school, 67% of the women did all or most of the housework. Only 10% of the husbands did as much as half of the housework before their wives returned to school, and only 17% were reported as doing half the housework when these women returned to school.

Although a return to school may not have brought about a more equitable distribution of family responsibilities, 58% of these women reported that there were some changes in their home and family life, and 18% said there was a great deal of change. These changes reflect a concern with managing extra responsibilities and perhaps some guilt feelings over not doing all that is expected of them. Not surprisingly, 74% of the women reported that there was not enough time for housework, entertaining, or other home related or social activities. Thirty-three percent mentioned that there was not enough time for family. Changes were most evident for large families.

A relationship between age and the change reported in home and family life was observed. There was more change in home life for older women returning to school. See Table 5.

TABLE 5

Age and Change in Home and Family Life

	Change	
	Some	None
Age:		
20-29	55.5% (10)	44.4% (8)
30-39	85.7% (12)	14.3% (2)
40+	84.6% (22)	15.4% (4)

As could be expected, more change also was reported in the home and family life of those women with children. See Table 6.

TABLE 6

Number of Children and Change in Home Life

	Change	
	Some	None
No children	(42.9% (3)	57.1% (4)
One child	87.5% (7)	12.5% (1)
Two or more children	86.5% (32)	13.5% (5)

Typically there were mentions of "messier houses," "simpler meals," and a "more stressful life." These comments, however, were embedded in the

context of more general positive comments like "my life had new dimensions which my husband didn't share. He and I enjoyed this--because I had new things to bring to him which enlarged his life as well as my own, new interests, ideas, friends, and perspectives," or "I had to work doubly hard to keep the house clean, cooking, and still find time for homework, but my family had a happier wife and mother."

The comments of these women returning to school hint at one of the major findings of this survey. A return to school, in almost all cases, is an enjoyable, valuable experience. The positive impact of this particular self-initiated change on the individual appears almost unquestionable. Eighty-five percent of the women reported that they enjoyed school (or are enjoying school) very much. Seventy-five percent felt that it changed their lives in significant ways. Sixty-six percent mentioned increased knowledge, understanding, and qualification for a specific job as the significant contributions of continuing their education. Sixty-one percent mentioned that a return to school gave them a sense of accomplishment and achievement, or gave them new confidence and self-respect. The feeling of accomplishment gained from a return to school seems to offset many of the external, concrete problems encountered and probably contributes significantly to the overall positive evaluation of the school experience. This finding is not unexpected and supports the hypothesis that there is a loss of self-esteem and a decrease in feelings of competence and efficacy associated with a routine, unchallenging job, or centering life completely around home and children that can be regained with a return to school. A return to school presents an integrative challenge. Mentions of small failures in fulfilling the housewife role may reflect the respondent's feeling that now she is concerned with higher, more important values and has moved beyond a preoccupation with routine household tasks.

The fact that they are mentioned at all suggests that they are not major problems and are noted to call attention to the necessity to move between two worlds and to meet the responsibility of each. Achieving this engenders a feeling of competence best explained as a feeling of managing, of control, of being able to organize and utilize all of one's resources to accomplish various tasks.

This renewed feeling of accomplishment should be especially evident for women who attended a college or university before stopping their education. These woman are probably most aware that their need for acnievement and involvement is not being met and that something is missing in their lives. Seventy-one percent of the women that returned to school completed at least some college before stopping their education for the first time.

A return to school not only satisfied a desire for achievement for many women, but it also was perceived as enhancing existing interpersonal relationships. A particularly forthright and thoughtful response given by a woman who returned to school after 12 years to work on an MSW degree illustrates this finding: "It provided new perspectives, direction, and structure to my life. I discovered, or rather rediscovered, enjoyable talents in myself and gained a greater poise and self-confidence as a result of my feeling of competence and knowledgeability. It enabled me to establish a more sharing relationship with my children that crossed parent-child boundaries and it enabled me to share common interests and work with my husband (a psychologist) and to enrich the excitement we feel for each other."

Another woman wrote: "I gained a sense of self-respect, felt more able to converse with people. I began to appreciate myself as having more ability than I realized. I had a sense of accomplishment and achievement for myself and my efforts, and this knowledge gave me more insight into family problems."

More directly, another woman stated: "I have less time to devote to unimportant areas. I am more interesting to myself and others. I have goals other than child rearing. I don't harp on the children but rather get to my own work."

Other significant changes that were reported included gaining greater respect from family (17%) and gaining new friends (10%). Enjoyment of school also was related to high scores on the encouragement index discussed earlier. More enjoyment of school was reported by women who perceived substantial support from their social environment (see Table 7).

TABLE 7

Encouragement Index and Enjoyment of School

	Encouragement	
	Low	High
Did not enjoy school	29.4% (5)	4.5% (1)
Enjoy school very much	70.6% (12)	95.5% (21)

Reports of significant positive changes in one's life were most prevalent for the older women in the sample (see Table 8).

TABLE 8

Age and Significant Positive Changes in Life

Age:	Some change	No change
20-29	64.7% (11)	35.3% (6)
30-39	76.9% (10)	23.1% (3)
40+	80.8% (21)	19.2% (5)

One can suggest that this result stems from the fact that an older woman's life contains more elements that could be changed by schooling when compared with the life of a younger woman. Just as returning to college effected the greatest change in the day to day life of the older woman, so it is that this group was most likely to be more profoundly affected by the college experience as well. In line with several other findings, relatively fewer young women have experienced periods of doubt related to self-esteem and achievement motivation, and accordingly a return to school does not produce noticeable changes for them. These women also have been out of school for a relatively shorter time and reintegration is a much simpler process.

The enjoyment of the school experience noted by the respondents was reflected in their academic performance. Ninety-one percent of the women did at least as well in their schoolwork as they had the last time they were in school. Fifty percent reported grades better than the grades they received earlier. Forty-two percent received some type of a degree. Twenty percent received a B.A. degree, 52% an M.A. degree, 16% received both a B.A. and an M.A., and 4% earned a Ph.D. Thirty-seven percent of these women are still attending school either part or full time.

On the whole, these women did not report many problems directly related to the school experience itself. Sixty-three percent reported liking their fellow students very much upon their return and 76% felt accepted and comfortable with the other students. The majority of the students did not report any problems in "fitting in" to the school environment. The problems that were mentioned included acceptance by professors, counsellors, and advisers (16%), not feeling a part of the university (28%), and resentment by other students (7%). Some of the women reported that their motives in taking classes were questioned and that they were discouraged from trying to undertake a program of study if they could only attend classes on a part-time

basis. Most reports of not feeling a part of the university centered around not having enough time to spend on campus to take part in extra activities. Some women who were only taking one or two classes and could devote a great deal of time to them noted that some other students resented their hard work and felt that the returning women had an unfair advantage. It was the women aged 30 and older who were most likely to report these types of problems (see Table 9).

TABLE 9

Age and Problems Encountered*

Age:	Acceptance by Professors	Not feeling a part of the University	Resentment by other students	None	Other
20-29	11.8% (2)	29.4% (5)	0.0% (0)	64.7% (11)	5.9% (1)
30-39	23.1% (3)	38.5% (5)	15.4% (2)	38.5% (5)	7.7% (1)
40+	24.0% (6)	32.0% (8)	8.0% (2)	52.0% (13)	0.0% (0)

* Due to multiple responses, percentages do not sum to 100.

Many students reported more concrete problems in returning to school. Hours of classes was the problem most frequently mentioned, followed by problems work parking and libraries, notably reserve books.

Over half of the returning women reported some initial disappointments with the school experience. That these disappointments were not later labelled as problems suggests that most women were able to deal with some gap between previous expectations and the actual experience and were able to overcome it. The main disappointments were with the structure of the uni-

versity, the majors available, and red-tape problems. These disappointments are not, of course, peculiar to returning women students. Consistent with a general trend, older women were somewhat more likely to report these disappointments than were younger women (see Table 10).

TABLE 10

Age and Disappointment with School

	Yes	No
Age:		
20-29	47.1% (8)	52.9% (9)
30-39	64.3% (9)	35.7% (5)
40+	56.0% (14)	44.0% (11)

Fifty-seven percent of the women reported at least some second thoughts after returning to school. These doubts fell into two basic categories: those related to family and home (41%), e.g., "am I neglecting my home and family?" and doubts related to ability to succeed (52%), e.g., "can I do it?" or "am I too old?" Although there is a trend for more second thoughts of this type to be expressed by older women, the pattern is not pronounced.

TABLE 11

Age and Second Thoughts Related to School

	Yes	No
Age:		
20-29	50.0% (8)	50.0% (8)
30-39	50.0% (7)	50.0% (7)
40+	65.0% (17)	34.6% (9)

Second thoughts were also related to scores on the self-esteem measure. The scores on this measure were dichotomized at the mean. Those with higher self-esteem scores were less likely to report second thoughts when returning to school.

TABLE 12

Self-esteem and Second Thoughts Related to School

	Second Thoughts?	
	Yes	No
Low self-esteem	78.8% (18)	22.0% (5)
High self-esteem	38.0% (12)	62.0% (20)

$\chi^2 = 7.39$, $p < .05$

Overall, 64% of the women stated that a return to school made positive changes in them and their lives, and 41% rate the change as very positive and as improving their lives in many ways. Twenty-two percent saw a return to school as having both positive and negative aspects. Only one person indicated that returning to school had a totally negative impact upon her life. Although older women experienced more problems, more disappointments and second thoughts, it was the older women who reported the most positive overall evaluation of the school experience. The younger women were most likely to report mixed or negative changes associated with a return to school (Table 13). As noted earlier, perhaps the problems and difficulties experienced by older women are viewed as a test or as a challenge. Meeting this challenge results in a feeling of competence gained from organizing one's resources to initiate a change or a goal and achieving it.

TABLE 13

Age and Evaluation of School Experience

Age	Mixed or Negative Reaction
20-29	55.6%
30-39	25.0%
40+	26.9%

Another behavioral measure of the overall impact of a return to school and the success of this self-initiated life change is the attrition or drop-out rate discussed earlier. Forth-eight percent of all women returning to school dropped out of school at least once since their return. The reasons given for dropping out are fairly diverse and do not seem to revolve around any one particular issue. In order of frequency, the reasons mentioned included personal problems, e.g., illness, marriage, or pregnancy (31%), financial problems (21%), lack of interest, motivation, or changed goals (21%), school did not leave enough time for family responsibilities (17%), moved away, suitable program not available elsewhere (14%), and difficulty with school (3%).

School drop-out was related to a general fate control question, suggesting that success in school may be influenced by some general attitudes and beliefs as well as by more immediate factors like encouragement and support.

TABLE 14

Fate Control and Drop-out

	A man can make long-range plans for his life, but a woman has to take things as they come	
	True	False
Drop-out	66.7% (12)	39.5% (15)
No Drop-out	33.3% (6)	61.5% (23)

An alternative interpretation deserves mention. Rather than reflecting a fairly stable attitude about life control, it may be that a woman's response to this item may itself have been influenced by her being forced to disrupt her school plans to accomodate her family or others.

There also was some indication that those women with higher self-esteem scores were less likely to drop out of school. A t-test on the mean self-esteem scores of these two groups did not, however, reach significance. The drop-out rate also was slightly higher in the middle age group (30-39) than in either of the other two age groups. Those in this age group also reported more problems with acceptance as adult returnees (see Table 9) and more disappointment upon returning (see Table 10). These findings could be interpreted as suggesting that it is this stage of the life cycle (30-40) when women are most likely to be defining themselves in terms of others and are most likely to experience a loss in self-esteem. This loss in self-esteem might be manifested in greater difficulties with a return to school. Women in the younger group have only been away from school for a relatively few years, have a realistic view of the school experience, and have little difficulty "fitting in." Older women usually have defined themselves as older women returning to school and expect not to fit in to the general student population. Women in the middle group, however, are probably least sure about fitting in and about their own goals and expected achievements. The mean self-esteem score of the 30-39 group was lower than the mean self-esteem score of the 20-29 group or the 40+ group. However, an analysis of variance performed on the self-esteem scores of the three age groups did not reach significance.

General attitudes and values of women contacting the Center

Looking at the total sample of women who contacted the Center, it was observed that only 10% see themselves as doing all the things they would really like to be doing. Those with the highest self-esteem scores are most likely to place themselves in this category. The others report that various aspects of their life are unfulfilled. Basically two things are missing: (1) a sense of accomplishment, purpose, "a job I could do well in," "a project of my own," "challenge and creative involvement," and, closely related, (2) time, usually for creative endeavors. There were relatively few mentions of friendship, interpersonal closeness, time for family, money, or travel. The majority of these women are married and presumably secure in some type of family relationships. Perhaps, as Bardwick (1971) suggests, these women have satisfied the affiliative goals and can now look in other directions, notably to personal development and achievement. Accordingly, when asked "what would make you happiest?" or "what do you imagine as the most satisfying thing that could happen in your life in the next five years?" 61% mentioned having a happy husband and/or children, or helping some family member realize their potential, but 88% also mentioned some intellectual achievement, e.g., finishing education. This is in marked contrast to the results of a study of college age women completed by Bardwick (1971) in which she observed that not one respondent referred to her own academic or professional role as a source of happiness.

The responses of these women best describe the concern for interpersonal matters which is now infused with a motive to achieve independently: "To feel needed and effective, that my children would turn out well with a life and career of their own, and that I would have a satisfying job of my own and recognition in my own right." "It would satisfy me to achieve more recognition

because of my work. I'm assuming, of course, that everything goes as well as it has at home so far, the children are developing, my marriage is satisfying, and I see no radical changes."

When asked "what kinds of things have you done in your life which you think of as accomplishments and achievements?", 86% of these women mention some type of academic or vocational achievement besides the usual mention of success in interpersonal relationships and internal development found to characterize the responses of young college women (Lipinski, 1966).

Generally, the women who have contacted the Center, whether or not they returned to school, describe themselves as independent, intellectual, competitive occupationally, and attractive. In this and several other respects, these women resemble the composite given by Birnbaum (1971) to describe the married professional more closely than the composite describing the homemaker. Birnbaum studied three groups of University of Michigan alumnae graduating between 1945 and 1955: 1) homemakers, married women with intact families and children at home, with no degree beyond the bachelor's level, and not currently in school, 2) married professionals, women with the highest degree in their particular field; and 3) single professionals. Birnbaum compared the life patterns, personality style, and self-esteem of these three groups of women.

As a group, the women who contacted the Center believe in the general aims of the women's liberation movement, egalitarian marriages, and that the worker and mother role can be successfully and creatively combined. Again, in these areas they resemble the married professionals more closely than the homemakers described by Birnbaum (see Tables 15 and 16).

TABLE 15

	CEW women (73)	Married Professionals	Homemakers
A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with children as a mother who does not work:			
True	80%	100%	65%
False	12%	0%	35%
	(13)	(25)	(29)

TABLE 16

		CEW women	Married Professionals	Homemakers
It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one for herself:				
	True	23%	25%	71%
	False	77%	75%	21%
		(73)	(25)	(29)

Generally the women who contact the Center have successfully integrated the important goals in their lives and have resolved the question of their independence and individuality. They do not appear as independent, assertive, and self-assured as the married professionals, but they are certainly not like the homemakers with motherhood as a focal life role and little faith in their competence and self-worth. Just a decision to contact the Center for Continuing Education for Women, regardless of outcome, is indicative of

reaching a point where the need for independent achievement has become a goal in its own right. If this goal conflicted with goals of interpersonal closeness and approval in the past, it seems that the conflict has been resolved prior to a decision to contact the Center. The clients of the Center generally are not in need of psychological counsel, or help in resolving feminine role conflicts or in formulating life goals. This finding is supported by the observation that there are few attitudinal differences between the women who continue their education after contacting the Center and those that do not

There are no striking differences in attitudes toward marriage, children, combining marriage and career, or achievement and satisfaction between those who decide to continue their education and those that do not. The two groups also are distributed similarly with regard to background and descriptive factors. This suggests that the decision not to continue education after contacting the Center is largely the result of external family and financial problems.

It was hypothesized that women who do not return to school might be more satisfied with their job or perceive themselves as more successful in their occupation than those women returning to school. No difference was observed in this area, however.

One difference that does emerge centers on the life-changing role of marriage. The women who did not return to school are more likely to hold polarized views of how marriage changes a woman's life. They focus on either the fulfilling, enriching aspects of marriage or on the restricting, self-sacrificing aspects of marriage. In contrast, women who returned to school are more likely to hold a balanced view of marriage, mentioning the enlarging aspects as well as the narrowing, loss of freedom aspects of marriage.

TABLE 17

Return to School and View of Marriage

	More positive than neg. responses	Both negative and positive responses	More negative than pos. responses
Women who did not return to school	45% (9)	15% (3)	40% (8)
Women who returned to school	24% (13)	47% (26)	27% (16)

$\chi^2 = 6.77$

One interpretation of this finding is that women who do not have marriage as the focal point of their lives and are involved in projects and activities outside the home are more likely to hold a realistic view of its advantages and disadvantages.

One interesting difference was observed in the self-esteem scores of these two groups. Women who returned to school had higher self-esteem scores. A t-test on the mean self-esteem scores of these two groups revealed a significant difference ($t = 2.13$, $p < .05$). As noted earlier, there is no ground for inferring a causal relationship between self-esteem and a return to school. Several explanations for this relationship could be offered. Perhaps a return to school and consequent increases in feelings of competency and achievement results in a somewhat higher self-esteem score. Or, just as plausibly, perhaps there is a selection factor operating. Those with higher self-esteem are more sure of themselves, perceive themselves as more able to cope with the problems of continuing their education, and are the ones that make the decision to return to school. Nevertheless, the positive relationship between returning to school and higher self-esteem needs further sys-

tematic study.

Conclusions

A return to school can be viewed as a self-initiated life change. The women in this study are relatively affluent, come from relatively well-educated families, already have at least some college education themselves, and are returning to school solely because they want to. These women usually have fairly clear cut goals. The goals they set for themselves range from the specific, getting a degree, to the more general, self and family enrichment. Yet in probing for reasons for return, we find that almost all women have a relatively specific, long-term goal in mind (obtaining a degree, training for a new job or career, gaining some specific skill) and some ideas about how to achieve it. A return to school is seen as a generally enriching experience but also as a vehicle for a specific change.

Although a return to school is a self-initiated activity, one of the most important factors related both to enjoyment of the school experience and to remaining in school is the perceived support from the important others in the immediate social environment. This usually means the help and encouragement received from husbands, children, friends, and instructors and advisers. The more support a woman receives, the more likely she is to return to school, to stay in school once returning, and to enjoy school.

The major problems encountered in a return to school center on managing time so that both family demands and school responsibilities can be accommodated. A return to school is regarded as just another activity which must fit into the existing pattern of responsibilities. Some shifting of responsibilities to other family members is noted, especially for older women and women with two or more children, but no radical changes are found. A return

to school is a woman's own idea, she expects to be able to manage it successfully without major disruptions in her roles as wife, mother, or worker, and she usually does. Most women note some worries over not having enough time for their families but these worries are generally embedded in a context of positive comments about the school experience.

The most significant life changes reported as a result of a return to school include not only achieving stated goals, getting a degree,and gaining some specific skill, but also gaining a sense of achievement and accomplishment. These feelings of renewed self confidence and competency, which are consistently reported, seem to more than offset the family problems encountered or problems with school itself, and contribute significantly to the finding that returning to school is a positive, enjoyable experience.

These women perform well in school, feel accepted and comfortable with other students, and usually report few problems or institutional barriers. The problems that are mentioned include acceptance by professors, resentment by other students, and fitting into the university environment. It is generally the older women who report these types of problems and who experience more disappointments and second thoughts upon returning to school. Yet despite these problems, the older students are more likely to describe the return to school in more glowing, positive terms, presumably because of the overall feelings of independent achievement that are experienced. Younger women, less likely to feel that accomplishment and achievement are missing from their lives, do not generally view a return to school in these terms and report more mixed reactions to the school experience. There also was some indication that women in the 30-39 age group have the most uncertain self-conceptions and the most difficulty fitting into the school environment.

Overall, regardless of age, a return to school appears to have a positive impact on these women, at least in terms of their feelings about themselves. They also report that their families benefit as well. Data is now needed on whether these renewed feelings of self confidence and achievement have behavioral correlates, that is, whether they are translated into success in careers or jobs, or into observable changes in relations with their families.

This study also found that, unlike typical college age women, women who have interrupted their education and are contemplating a return to school view academic and professional accomplishments as a source of satisfaction and happiness, and as notable achievements in life. These women see themselves as being independent, competitive, and intellectual. They feel that the worker, mother, and wife roles can be successfully combined. Very few differences were found between those women that returned to school and those who did not. Higher self-esteem scores were obtained from those women that returned to school, however. More investigation of the relationship between self-esteem and a return to school is needed to determine the direction of this relationship.

The results of this study suggest that women contacting the Center for the Continuing Education of Women are usually seeking to do just that--continue their education. Conflicts over fulfilling the traditional feminine role and developing their own ability are either not relevant or have been resolved. Consistent with viewing a return to school as a self-initiated life change, these women are not in need of psychological counsel, but rather in need of support, encouragement, and specific goal related advice.

Further studies in this area should concentrate on women who return to school on a full-time basis and should investigate more systematically the pattern of drop-out and return. More investigation is also needed on the

differential experience of women in the 30-39 age group. Further study on the achievement motivation of women who have returned to school and have satisfied affiliative goals associated with the feminine image also would be valuable.

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